

Making the Intolerable Tolerable

Think Tanks

By Paul Dickson.

Atheneum. 384 pp. \$10

Reviewed by RONALD STEEL.

From the Pentagon Papers we learned about a thing called R&D, a mysterious place somewhere on the California coast where top-secret documents float around. But we didn't learn much about it. Paul Dickson's useful Baedeker of the diverse and ubiquitous institutions known as "think tanks" throws the spotlight on this new multi-billion-dollar business that is transforming America and may even be serving as a kind of secret government.

What are the *Think Tanks* of Dickson's title? They are a particular kind of research and development (R&D) outfit. They can be large or small, profit or nonprofit, government-financed or independent. The crucial thing about them is the role they play. Unlike many R&D organizations, think tanks neither conduct research nor undertake development. Instead they act, in the author's words, "as a bridge between knowledge and power and between science/technology and policy-making in areas of broad interest." In short, they are agents of knowledge—which they organize, transmit, and transpose—rather than creators of knowledge.

If you want someone to build you a better mousetrap, you go to a conventional R&D laboratory where a scientist will set to work inventing what you need. But if you want to know how many mice are in your block, what is their family structure, how they organize their time, and what function they serve in relation to man and his environment, then you had better go to a think tank.

In case this should sound like esoteric work for a handful of dreamy scientists and economists, think again. R&D is big business, and it is getting bigger all the time. This year it will hit an estimated \$23 billion—more than the annual budget of an average-sized European nation. More than half that sum comes out of the federal treasury—that is, out of our pockets in the form of taxes. This year's federal R&D budget is estimated at \$16 billion. As recently as 1957 it was only \$3 billion.

The U.S. today spends more each year on space research alone—only a small part of the R&D budget—than it cost to run the entire government in 1927. Over the past decade more than \$150 billion has been spent on R&D.

Naturally there has been a proliferation of institutes, agencies, and think tanks to absorb that money and provide blueprints of real or imagined needs to get more of it.

R&D is composed of three basic activities: basic research, or exploration of the unknown; applied research, directed toward a specific need; and development, the use of research to produce tangible objects, methods, or systems. This may sound vague, but it has to be in order to cover the multitude of activities that encompass R&D: from the design of a new nuclear warhead to a project for the integration of a school district.

Without R&D there would, of course, be no lunar modules, no styrofoam eggs, no color TV, and no ABMs.

Ronald Steel's latest book is Imperialists and Other Heroes: A Chronicle of the American Empire.

Whether or not this would be a blessing is a question of a different order. In a technological society like ours, invention is essential to survival. Without a constant stream of new inventions and techniques we might quite possibly drown in the pollution and destruction caused by our previous inventions. Thus R&D, by promising to make tolerable the intolerable things it has created, has provided built-in job security for itself.

Examining the nation's leading R&D institutions and interviewing people involved in a wide variety of activities, Paul Dickson, a young journalist on a grant from the American Political Science Association, has done a skillful and highly readable job of journalistic reporting. *Think Tanks* tells us what R&D is all about, takes us behind the scenes of some major organizations, makes a few editorial judgments about the kind of work they do, and leaves us feeling better informed, if not necessarily wiser. If he had dug deeper beneath the surface and asked more of the right kind of questions, he might have come up with an even more penetrating and important study.

Among some of the organizations studied by Dickson is the Institute for Defense Analysis, a top-secret, Pentagon-financed think tank that plots scenarios for nuclear wars, works out new methods for the United States to